

Op-Ed by San Bernardino County Supervisor Josie Gonzales
“Is Perchlorate Contamination Clean Up Slipping From Our Grasp?”

In spite of what you may have been told about Tuesday’s unproductive meeting between the County of San Bernardino and the City of Rialto, I have stayed focused on what is important – the containment and clean up of perchlorate contamination in Rialto’s ground water.

The City has sued the County and about 40 other parties who City leaders claim have polluted the City’s water. The City’s filing of a lawsuit before State environmental enforcement agencies have assigned responsibility for the perchlorate contamination clean up presents two major problems:

- While the parties argue over who may owe what in monetary damages to the City, the eastern plume of perchlorate pollution flows steadily toward more drinking water wells and the Santa Ana River.
- And, by whipping up everyone into a litigious frenzy, the City has made it more difficult for the State Regional Water Quality Control Board, Santa Ana Region to secure the cooperation of the potentially responsible parties to investigate the extent of the contamination and develop solutions to contain it.

While I disagree with the City’s strategy, I acknowledge its right to pursue it. However, I cannot wait for the lawsuit to solve the problem. Lawsuits take years and millions of dollars to resolve. The residents of Rialto and Colton do not have that kind of time or money.

City wells have been shut down because of two perchlorate plumes originating in the north end of the Rialto-Colton Basin.

The County of San Bernardino is working to contain the western plume of perchlorate in the Rialto-Colton Basin. We have accepted responsibility for cleaning up this plume, because a private aggregate mining operation on County-owned land flushed perchlorate out of the soil near the Mid-Valley Sanitary Landfill.

The County has fully cooperated with the State Regional Board. We have spent roughly \$7 million during the past four years investigating the contamination flushed by the mining operation and to construct a treatment facility to stop its advancement. The County-built treatment facility at the Rialto Airport started delivering clean drinking water to Rialto residents in early June. The County plans to spend at least \$3 million more to

expand the treatment facility. And, we will likely spend more than \$500,000 per year to operate that treatment facility.

As a result of the County's proactive measures, the perchlorate pollution from the private mining operation has not affected the City drinking water supply. In addition as a responsible neighbor, the County reimburses the City for water the City has to import because of the perchlorate contamination.

I'm not sure why the City believes the County owes it another \$6 million when we've already done so much to clean up perchlorate. Unfortunately, during our meeting Tuesday, Councilman Ed Scott chose to focus on disruptive, unrelated issues rather than explain how the County has damaged the City.

I will not pay the attorney's fees for the five law firms the City has hired. The City chose to sue the County a year and a half after the County started its investigation and clean up measures and a year after the County accepted a clean up order from the State Regional Board. The City did not need to sue the County.

I have offered to meet with City leaders again about their lawsuit if they demonstrate a commitment to contain and clean up perchlorate. I have asked that they sign a memorandum of understanding regarding the pursuit of federal funds for the perchlorate contamination clean up by September 14. This shouldn't be difficult as the City Council approved the MOU back on March 21.

The County, cities of Rialto and Colton, West Valley Water District and Fontana Water worked for nearly a year to draft an Initial 5-Year Groundwater Cleanup Approach white paper. The City demanded the MOU, which every other party has now signed, except Rialto. The City's failure to sign its own MOU calls into question the sincerity of its leaders' stated commitment to protect Rialto residents from the cost of the perchlorate contamination clean up and provide them with clean drinking water.

Our local Congressional delegation in Washington D.C. has made it repeatedly clear to all of us that we will only continue to receive federal funding or be given future consideration if the group stays united. Senator Feinstein and Congressman Baca were successful in getting authorized this year a \$25 million fund for ground water clean up in the Santa Ana River watershed and Santa Clara County. We must be ready to submit a joint grant application as soon as funding is appropriated to the program.

If Rialto is not on board, I must know now so that I can start working to secure funds without the City. I will not have the important clean up work be held up any longer by the City's baseless demand for a \$6 million payment.

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